



SPYWARE: HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Roy Cooper
North Carolina Attorney General

www.ncdoj.com

What is spyware?

Spyware is computer software that allows someone else to monitor your online activities. Spyware is typically installed without your knowledge and used to track what you do online. Even though it is installed surreptitiously and operates without your permission, some spyware can be relatively harmless. However, other kinds of spyware can be used to commit fraud against you because they can collect your personal information like credit card account numbers and passwords. In a few instances spyware can be used legitimately, such as when it is installed by parents who want to monitor the online activities of children to ensure their safety. But for the most part spyware should be avoided.

Why is spyware a problem?

The problems caused by spyware can range from annoying to severe. Spyware can change the settings on your web browser, redirect you to unintended sites, cause frequent computer crashes, and allow unsolicited pornographic advertisements to be displayed. It could also make you a victim of identity theft if it allows someone to get your personal information, such as account numbers and passwords.

How does spyware get on my computer?

Spyware can be installed in several ways. As mentioned above, monitoring software can be intentionally installed to help parents protect the online safety of children. But computer users often download spyware programs without realizing it when they download other software or sign up for a free online service. Information about the spyware and permission to install it are often buried in the fine print of the End User License Agreement (EULA) of the service or program. Some shameless spyware operators hide their product in "free" anti-spyware programs. In some cases consumers even pay for anti-spyware programs that are in fact spyware.

How do I know if my computer has spyware on it?

Spyware can be difficult to detect. The following list of symptoms may indicate that spyware has been installed on your computer.

- A change to your browser home page. (ex. “about:Blank”)
- Excessive pop-up ads.
- Receiving pop-up ads when not online.
- New icons on your desktop.
- Addition of new Internet toolbars.
- Random or more frequent error messages (ex. “404” messages).
- Slow performance when opening or downloading files.
- Frequent computer crashes.
- Problems printing.
- Unwanted websites added to your “favorites list.”
- Emails being sent without your knowledge.

How can I avoid having spyware installed on my computer?

The following suggestions should help you avoid unintentionally installing spyware.

- Avoid downloading free software from unfamiliar sources.
- When downloading free software or signing-up for free services, read the EULA carefully to determine what else, if anything, you are installing.
- Ensure your Internet browser security is high enough to detect unauthorized downloads, and keep your browser updated.
- When closing a pop-up advertisement, do not click on a link within the pop-up window. Use the “X” icon in the tool bar.
- Avoid advertisements and emails from unfamiliar sources offering free anti-spyware programs.
- Update your software regularly.
- Install a personal firewall to block unauthorized access to your computer.
- Install or update your anti-virus program.
- Check your software provider’s web site for updates and alerts.

How can I remove spyware?

If you believe spyware is installed on your computer, get an anti-spyware program from a vendor you know and trust. Set the program to scan on a regular basis, and every time you start your computer if possible. Delete any software programs the anti-spyware program detects that you do not want.

For more information on spyware, visit the Federal Trade Commission’s website at <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/alerts/spywarealrt.pdf>.